ORGANIZATION AMONGST WORKING WOMEN

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Over five million women are at work in the United States according to the 1900 census, over five million removed from the home wholly or in part, over five million who are factors in the industrial world to reckon for themselves, to be reckoned for and to be reckoned with. Despite such figures, as a nation we superstitiously hug the belief that our women are at home and our children at school, and though legislators have at times enacted laws protective to them, regulating hours and in some instances dangerous occupations, as a whole the community—and this includes many of the working women themselves—is reluctant to face the situation frankly and seriously, that women no longer spin and weave and card, no longer make the butter and the cheese, scarcely sew and put up the preserves at home, but accomplish these same industries in the factories, in open competition with men, and except in the relatively few instances of trade organization, in competition with each other.

The introduction of complicated machinery, the substitution of machine-made for hand-made things, and the impracticability of the introduction of these machines into the homes are of course primarily responsible for the transfer of the women workers from the home to the factory and shop. The fact that the women have received their pay in money for their labor under these altered conditions has had probably no little effect upon the changes in their position in the social world, and has helped to give them their distinct place in the industrial consideration. Probably they worked as hard, produced as much under the old methods, but laboring at home for and with the domestic group, they neither had occasion nor opportunity to classify in the larger group of trade and occupation.

I will acknowledge in the beginning of this brief outline of

women's efforts in organization that my mind is filled with the paramount importance of the arguments for coming together in trade unions, though I am not competent to speak as an expert and would probably be open to the discriminating charge of the old darkey, who said, "Pears to me that sometimes when a reformah gits up to 'splain, it's like de preacher who took two hours and a half to 'spress one of de ten commandments, and dey nevah was no disputation bout it in de fust place." I do know that there are many who, while agreeing as to the efficacy of trades unionism among men, have not taken the women seriously in this.

There is little reliable data from which to make deductions concerning working women; indeed, we scarcely know more than the numerical facts and are not able to establish reliable theories. From the census we learn that the five millions and more women earning money away from home are increasing in number more rapidly than are the working men, and that the rate of increase is greater than that of our entire female population. These figures are expressive of a possible reversal of the orthodox order of things, potentially involving us in a new order; and they are suggestive, if not explanatory, of the race reduction statistics.

Congress is now considering an application from the Secretary of Commerce and Labor to make appropriation for a thorough Federal investigation of women in industry. This has been earnestly urged by the women in industry themselves through their trades unions, and the Women's Trades Union League, and by others. Because of the dearth of authentic information, and also because of many erroneous and sometimes sensational ideas afloat, it is to be hoped that accurate information of the whole subject will be made possible (through this investigation) and that public opinion not less than educational and legislative plans may be guided by its results. Meanwhile, and because of the paucity of literature concerning the American situation, one must draw upon accumulations of personal experiences and observations for inferences of significance in the movement among the women towards organization. Whether it is an unconscious merging of the interests of the crowd, a movement fraught with signs and portents intelligible and seriously considered by the initiated, what is the attitude of the outsider, what the moral obligation of those indirectly involved? In ten minutes I can hope only to touch upon the attitude of the non-

combatants—if the term is permissible—and of those directly involved.

Abroad there have been more protective governmental measures than with us. One English writer says: "Out of the desecration of child life and womanhood recorded in the blue books in the earlier part of the last century came the beginnings of a state control in England of special conditions of health and security for them."

Certain trades have been considered particularly dangerous to women. The recommendations of the White Lead Commission in 1898 practically put a stop to the employment of women in that industry. Many countries have precautionary legislation for women before and after child-birth (see Oliver in "Dangerous Trades"), and all civilized countries forbid their employment in mines.

The International Labor Conference held last year in Berne (every civilized country being represented with the exception of the United States and Japan) made an international agreement to keep women out of manufacturing establishments at night. This is to go into effect in three years from the date of the conference, and covers all manufacturing trades with the exception of a few special industries where the time limit is extended.

Last February (1906) the American Association for Labor Legislation was organized, which in the future may send delegates to this international body. Under date of December 12, 1905, an American Consul, reporting on this body to the Secretary of State, ugred among other things, the advantage to be gained through uniform action by the different nations in regard to prohibition of night work by women in industrial establishments.

In America there is legislation in all States in which mines are situated prohibiting employment of women. In seven States there is legislation which prohibits employment of women to do buffing and glass polishing. Women are also prohibited from working behind bars. There is legislation in many States regarding this, and in those where the laws do not prohibit public opinion serves the same purpose.

There are also the better known restrictions as to hours of work permissible to women—limitation to fifty-eight hours a week in Massachusetts, sixty hours in New York. This law has been judged in the Supreme Court of Illinois as unconstitutional; has been judged constitutional in Massachusetts. Its constitutionality was

tested but yesterday in the courts of New York, and it has been enforced for years in Ohio. In this we can see the uncertainty of a uniform enforcement of attempted protection by the States.

I make reference to these statutory measures showing the existence of a public sentiment as to the necessity of guarding the interests of women, and there is yet a seemingly deep-rooted prejudice against regulations by themselves for themselves when expressed in trades unionism, a curious confusion in democratic principles. Law enactment is worshipped and yet law is suspected if made by an absolutely self-governing body, while, to the student, the development of protective legislation for working women seems a preliminary to the establishment of further protection through their own efforts. Law enactment has been and perhaps will be confined to the establishment of a standard for hours and hygienic conditions, leaving the question of wages entirely to the workers themselves.

In the United States, with the fear of special class legislation and paternalism in government, there is, perhaps, greater need than abroad for concerted action for the purpose of guarding and advancing the interests of the workers themselves. What part have the women workers played in this?

Historical precedent, lack of education in administration, and the conventional tradition of women—not any less among those who work—are potent frustrators of strong and permanent organizations. Though some have grasped the elementary fact of the advantage of collective bargaining and are not loth to be advantaged thereby, ignorance among the many of the import of trades unionism must necessarily make progress slow. The hope of marriage, the insufficient trade training, the demand for cheap and unskilled labor in many trades, and therefore the easy substitution in the ranks of the women wage earners are detrimental factors that preclude expectation of a large, general trades union movement among women in the near future.

More definite and therefore perhaps easier to combat, although a very serious obstruction to women's unions, is the sex antagonism, the blind rage against them for taking men's places, and the consequent disparagement and ridiculing by the men of the girls in their attempts to take their place in the industrial world seriously. Men's unions with larger vision, however, and this is more especially true of late, have invited and assisted women, either in separate organi-

zations or with them, and the American Federation of Labor has declared its policy to be "heartily in sympathy and ready to cooperate with any movement to organize women."

The women, despite handicaps, have organized in those trades where special skill is required, and also where the public sentiment among their comrades has been conducive to dignified organizations. For instance, the laundry workers in Chicago for ten years have sent their representative to the American Federation of Labor. The felt hat trimmers have been organized for nineteen years, the cigar makers for fourteen years, and in the boot and shoe work the women are said to be stronger unionists than the men in some localities.

Miss Herron's recent report of "Labor Organizations Among Women" gives us at some length the facts of their history and place in unions, and it is a favorable showing on the whole, an encouraging evidence of the working woman's intelligence, and is capable of favorable comparison with the position the "modern woman" has taken in the professions, in civic and educational and social organizations.

The Union Label League, pledging its members to patronage of articles made under union conditions, that is, in union shops, and holding the same philosophy that has gained the respect of the economists for the consumers' league, urges the power of the purchaser to create the condition. Some of the trades unions have auxiliary label leagues composed of the women members of the working man's family.

There has not been a valid economic argument presented by theorist or practical trades unionist that I have not heard from the lips of the leaders among women laborers. They know full well the fundamental economic fact of the essential and permanent inequality between the individual wage earner and the capitalist employer, and that the possibility of an absolutely free contract between them is a delusion. They are well aware that the danger to themselves and to their countless successors lies in the cutting under of prices by the "sweater" and the "poor widow" who has the "freedom" to work all day and all night at home. They speak with eloquence of the devastaion of child labor, the destruction to the homes through long hours and "speeding up" in the shops, their

deprivation of leisure and therefore the home. "For all we know," said one, "soup grows on trees."

These are the leaders, the forward guard who proclaim their right to engage in industry when they choose to do so, and to enter on terms of justice and with dignity, since the position of women in industry is dignified and should not be parasitic. They are producers, wealth creators and permanent factors, to be dealt with seriously, no better, nor worse than men, but according to their strength, their tasks and ability.

I have refrained from harrowing or romantic tales illustrative of women's struggles, hardships, heroisms, abilities, disabilities, exploitations, temptations, etc., because such illustrations must be familiar to all in this audience, and also because the dignified women I know in the industrial field would, I think, disparage such methods of presenting their cause. For thirteen years, however, I have seen various little groups organize under the inspiration of fine leadership and then melt away. Other groups have replaced them and the experiment has been repeated. Always have I been thrilled by the wisdom and unselfishness of the leaders, and overwhelmed with the pathos of the sacrifice of the standard-bearers and the great odds against them in their struggle.

The more or less ephemeral character of the organizations does not, however, affect the situation materially. Women remain in the trades and will for all time, and it is of grave importance that the best conditions should be established, not for favorable discrimination on account of sex, which cannot be defended, but for just pay for such work as her talents and her ability and her general fitness may entitle her. For this larger end may we not regard them also as students in an educational movement, though perhaps on the whole an unorganized five million still learning the rudiments of the industrial struggle, learning the hard lesson that it may be passed on in their homes with intelligence and comprehension to sons and husbands and daughters. The failure of the single trades union seems to count but little with these students, for never have I known one girl who believed that the principle, insomuch as she had grasped it, was wrong, but always that it was the circumstances beyond her control that prevented continuity of the group, or the misfortunes of strife that broke it up.

The public's attitude towards trades unionism has been prej-

udiced and the moral vision obscured. Good men and women speak of the menace to individual liberty through regulations and restrictions by unions, while agreeing to, and, in fact, often eager to accomplish this same restriction by legislation. As I have said, it is a great mistake to assume that there is more personal liberty or less in one than in the other. Labor legislation must of necessity act for the young and the immature, but intelligent trades union regulation for women by women has failed to be effective only because of lack of strong trades unions among them. Unless we speed their day they will be working "The Long Day" for small wage and carrying home the unfinished work to sap the strength of the youngest. When women have effective organizations and suitable State legislation, home work, which means sweat work and children's work, will be abolished. Legislation cannot accomplish this alone; the women are in a position to regulate and enforce this if backed by public sentiment.

The saving of the home of the working people rests upon the women. The elimination of the sweated workers is their task ultimately, and their intelligence can be trusted. They know why tuberculosis so often takes their shop-mates, why the shop work so often injures the eyes, why the "speeding up" with new machinery exhausts them, and the best of them believe that the hope of the betterment of women in industry lies in their quickening of industrial evolution, and that with more secure establishment in the trade they will be able to screw up the standard of life and the home bit by bit, and that they are not liable to get this unless they demand it and secure it themselves.

To sum up:

It is significant that, despite discouragement and handicap, the most thoughtful working women persist in their faith in organization, and it must be obvious that several things can be read from their persistency and their success as well as their failures.

1. The educational value for themselves and their families.

2. The evidence of the thought and decision and the parallel in club and social associations of the "new woman."

3. The serious recognition of themselves as permanent factors in the industrial and social world.

4. The belief in the possibility of their industrial organization replacing their present industrial disorganization.

5. Their need of the public's help and sympathy.

It is difficult to close without suggesting some action by the less directly involved public. This struggle of the working woman is not a class matter; it is one for the race welfare, and though there are heroes among them ready "to die for the cause," to establish themselves in better fortunes is beyond their feeble power unassisted by public sentiment. They believe—these most thoughtful working women—that the most direct way to a stable realization of their standards of wages and hours is through their own trade combinations, and that they are helping the employers as well as themselves. They agree to the necessity of that unfortunate law of competition that the conscientious and well-meaning employer is forced to the level of the employer without scruples, because hours and wages regulate the cost of production, and both the conscientious and indifferent enter the market in competition.

The last organization to be formed is the Women's Trades Union League, composed of working women and their allies, men and women who agree to the claim that I have set forth, and who desire to work with the women rather than for them in their efforts to obtain better conditions. The league owes its existence in America to a large-minded working woman, who has many times said much better what I have tried to say for her fellows to-night. She has been for years an organizer of women's trades unions, and holds that to be her highest mission, but she believes now, as do those enrolled in membership of this organization, that it is proper for men and women to give support and assistance to the working women in their efforts for organization, and that they—the public and the working women—need each other to accomplish this. This seems to be a clear call to that part of the community that with any seriousness concerns itself with the welfare and the fate of the women in industry.